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Appleby Archaeology Group    December Meeting 2

Members of the Appleby Archaeology Group were intrigued to learn how a “heap of old iron” found near Great Asby was meticulously investigated and found to be a significant hoard from the Anglo-Saxon period. Mr Ben Edwards, former county archaeologist for Lancashire, gave a lively description of how this had been achieved. His talk was illustrated by slides and his own detailed drawings of the finds.

In the early 1990s a metal-detectorist found a collection of metal work on Asby Winderswath Common. It was near the remains of some small buildings and did not appear to be in any type of container. Amongst the many pieces of rusty iron was a small decorative plaque which was sufficiently interesting for it and some other items from the hoard to be sent to the British Museum.

The plaque was about 4 inches long, had been gilded and was punctured by a rivet hole. It was engraved with a complex pattern which showed two dog-like animals facing away from one another and two birds facing inwards. Similar decorations have been found on artefacts from Scotland and Norway and in the carving of a cross fragment from Croft-in-Tees and this suggested the plaque was an example of 9th century Northumbrian art and that the other artefacts came from the same period.

Mr Edwards then did further research on all the items from the hoard. The metal work was carefully examined and drawn in detail. Once that was completed, a painstaking search was made for records of similar artefacts and over time most were identified and dated.

He described two instances where manuscripts had helped him to identify objects. A number of short blades were found at Asby. Similar blades had been found in hoards including ones from County Durham and from Dumfries and Galloway, but it was a pre-Norman conquest manuscript calendar, depicting men using such blades to scythe, that helped him to place the blades in context.

The collection also contained items that looked like bits used for drilling. Bits have been used



since Roman times and in this instance it was the Bayeux Tapestry that helped to identify the items for what they were. The tapestry shows men drilling with bits similar to those found in the hoard and, as there had been little change in technology since Saxon times and as similar tools had been found in a known Saxon hoard from Lincolnshire, it seemed reasonable to conclude that those found at Asby were indeed drill bits of that period.

He went on to describe many of the other objects including bells, probably for cattle, keys, parts of bolts and latch lifters. Similar items had been found in the Lincolnshire hoard and in other finds from as far a field as Czechoslovakia and, closer to home, at Dacre and Broughham. Most hoards have examples of axes, swords, knives and saddle decorations and the Asby hoard was no different

Mr Edwards emphasised that it was sometimes impossible to identify an object. However, if two or more were seen to be identical, as was the case with two small rods with curled ends found in the hoard, it was safe to assume they had some useful function.

He concluded by asking why the iron work had come to be on Asby Winderswath Common? He thought it unlikely that the hoard was associated with the buildings as they were too square for that period. The people who used tools of this kind would have lived in long houses on farmsteads, such as the one that has been excavated at Ribbleshead and it is more likely that this was a collection of scrap metal put together perhaps with the idea of recycling.

Mr Edwards was warmly applauded for his informative and scholarly talk. He then spent time with group members as they examined his drawings answering their questions .

The next meeting is on January 11th starting with the Annual General Meeting at 7 pm followed by a Member's evening with two speakers: Anne Bell, Keeping out Barbarians- a Walk Along the Wall; Trish Crompton, Digging in Slovakia